"Making Agricultural Research Count"
By U.S. Representative Larry Combest, Chairman
Subcommittee on Forestry, Resource Conservation, and Research

At a fraction of a penny for every dollar paid in taxes, the seed money going into agricultural research produces a harvest of the most abundant and dependable food supply in the world. However, it has been nearly 15 years since a comprehensive review of these programs has taken place and 20 years since a major piece of agricultural research, education, and extension legislation has been considered by the entire Congress.

This year, the Agriculture Committees of the U.S. House and Senate will conduct a comprehensive review of agricultural research programs. As chairman of the House subcommittee with jurisdiction over agricultural research programs, I will lead our efforts in this regard.

In laboratories and fields throughout the country, research improves agriculture's efficiency to provide a safe, abundant, high-quality, diverse and affordable food supply. That production is carried out with fewer cultivated acres and less fertilizer and pesticide than once thought necessary to feed the world. Too often, the discoveries and benefits that have come about through agricultural research efforts go unnoticed and unappreciated. I know of that from firsthand experience. For instance, few people outside my congressional district understand that the Plant Stress and Water Conservation Research Institute in Lubbock, Texas continues to make strides in improving the drought and heat tolerance of crops that are grown in arid areas. Yet, the general public's unfamiliarity with research provided an opening for a leap of logic that presumed the "stress" studies nestled potted plants onto a cozy couch to help them deal with their troubled lives. Quite the contrary, the fact is that this stress research has already resulted in crop varieties that can survive the harm inflicted by temperature extremes and drought conditions. Because of plant stress research, more people are fed and clothed from crops grown with increased efficiency and limited resources.

Other research has also been the target of wayward interpretations, including fun poked at Congress for funding studies of the sex habits of the fruit fly. Ranchers however, understood that we were eradicating the screwworm by interfering with its reproduction and savings hundreds of millions of dollars. Yet, do consumers understand the benefits they receive from these studies? And, have we in the agricultural community done our best to explain these benefits to consumers?

The answer is, probably not.

The success of American agriculture is so sweeping, it is difficult for many to truly comprehend. As well, agriculture's abundance in this country is so completely taken for granted that we have all heard about school children who believe milk comes from a carton and cotton shirts from Kmart. So all-encompassing is agriculture, the results become difficult to quantify.

Research has led to a sixfold increase in agricultural labor productivity since 1948. Almost

50 years ago, the number of people fed by one farmer was 15. Today, one farmer is able to feed 96 other people. Almost one-fourth of those are fed through our exports overseas. Research into new farming techniques and improved seed and nutrients have underwritten the success story of American agriculture. But the story is not over.

World demand for food is expected to double by the year 2025, not only due to population growth, but the growing ability to buy food worldwide. If cultivated acreage had to double to meet such demand, more land would be crowded out in the competition among the needs for living space, agriculture and nature. The results would be disastrous. Continued advances based on research are crucial to having an affordable and dependable food supply.

It is important, then that we clearly tell the public about the success of agricultural research.

I am proud of what has been accomplished through this research. We have made significant strides through past efforts. However, we must never be complacent. We should always be searching for ways to improve on our successes.

I believe that it is critical that we maintain a strong public and private research effort in order for American agriculture to continue to be profitable and competitive in the global economy of the future.

There were some significant research provisions included in the 1996 Farm Bill. The formation of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board should allow for increased communication and coordination between USDA, the research community, and the agricultural industry. Changes in the farm commodity programs took time away from a more comprehensive review of research programs. In order to still have the ability to revisit the research title, we reauthorized those programs for an additional two years.

The challenges involved with balancing the federal budget will continue to force Congress to make difficult spending choices in high priority programs such as research. We must strive to make each research dollar go as far as possible. With this in mind, as chairman of the Research Subcommittee, I intend to examine the current structure of our research system to ensure its accountability to taxpayers and agricultural producers while focusing on important needs identified by the industry. The Senate conducted four hearings on agricultural research in March. The House conducted three hearings during 1996, and more hearings are planned for later this spring.

As we go through this process, I want to explore opportunities to strengthen partnership efforts between the public and private sector. I also want to ensure that the structure of our research programs is flexible and responsive to the changing needs of an agricultural industry in an ever-changing world. As always, I welcome and encourage the ideas and comments of all farm organizations, as we look forward to harvesting ever-better results from research.